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Local
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Office

THE WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT BRIEF



*... a best practice guide to briefing
web development agencies*

The Website Development Brief

... a best practice guide to briefing web development agencies

Joint guidelines and template for business owners, to enable more effective working with web development agencies/companies.



Supported by:



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“Failing to prepare is preparing to fail”

This guide came about because my local enterprise office encountered a very common concern. Their client companies were spending huge chunks of their budgets on what often ended up being non-functioning, incomplete or disappointing website projects. I have suffered this pain myself despite my computer science qualifications, and I’ve seen many of the 200+ small business owners I’ve mentored and coached fall into the same trap. Perhaps you think you are not one of ‘those people’ but believe me, we can all find ourselves in that predicament.

Five years ago I established a business specifically to tackle this dilemma, so I was delighted to be asked to produce this guide. It affords me the opportunity to take what I’ve learned, tested and refined and place it in the hands of as many other small business owners as possible.

Whilst a guide like this can never be totally comprehensive, it will cover the major areas that you need to put down in writing before starting a website development project. I hope it will be an invaluable resource that helps you formulate your brief for web development agencies/companies.

It relies on the premise that to maximise your chance of success, your eventual development partner needs to know where you are now. And they need to know where you want to get to, what success will look like for you, and how it will be measured. Above all else, you need to make that crystal clear. If you can do that you’ll find that most agencies/companies will be pretty good at getting you where you want to go.

That is where the ‘*brief*’ comes in – it is the best way to capture the pertinent information concisely, yet comprehensively, so everyone will be singing off the same hymn sheet.

If there are other members of your business whose perspective will enrich your project brief, and will ensure it is as comprehensive as you can make it, then it is an excellent idea to involve them.

Don’t cut corners here. The problems that result will take many times longer and cost many times more to rectify. A rule of thumb us old-school software developers used was to spend 20% of the total time/budget of any project getting the requirements well documented. That is my challenge to you.

Patricia O’Sullivan

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P.S. If you want to skip sections of the suggested brief so be it, perhaps they are unsuited to your project, but more likely it’s because you can’t be bothered to complete them. On your head be it!

WHAT IS WEB DEVELOPMENT?

Website development, also known as website design, is the process of creating a new website or implementing changes to one already in use, e.g. adding a significant new section to a live site.

It is undertaken to attract and communicate with users and buyers, to enhance brands and to launch specific campaigns.

Website development can include web design, web content development (also known as the copy, or words), client liaison, web server and network security configuration, and e-commerce development.

Website development can range from developing a single page of plain text to the most complex web-based internet applications, electronic businesses, or social networks. If your goal is an advanced internet or mobile application then you will need to provide a little more than these guidelines will cover, but you will find them useful nonetheless.

WHY WRITE A BRIEF?

There are three compelling reasons why it is worth writing a brief for EVERY project you commission a development agency to undertake:

1. You get a better job.
2. It saves you both time and money.
3. The cost to you, and fee paid to the agency are fairer.

1. A BETTER JOB

A brief is the single most important piece of information you can prepare. It's from this that everything else flows. The supplier cannot be expected to read your mind or know everything you do; therefore it's essential that every effort be taken to prepare the best possible documentation of what is required.

Giving the tightest of parameters to creative thinkers (and that's what web developers are) will often stimulate the most creative of outcomes. You need to stimulate their creative imagination, not restrict it. Ultimately you are buying their creativity, but you want that creativity to be focused in the correct direction. That's why your brief should be a starting point; discovering halfway through the project that they are headed in the wrong direction inevitably leads to both sides playing *'the blame game'*.

Your brief will be the platform for your business online. Hundreds, thousands or hopefully hundreds of thousands of potential customers will see it. Therefore it behoves you to take a little time out of your busy schedule to thoughtfully describe your brand, your offerings, your market and your message. If you don't do that then you are relying on miracles as your strategy for success. From my experience, miracles are like buses - there is never one in sight when you need it.

2. SAVE TIME AND MONEY

Most people would agree that sloppy briefs and moving goalposts waste both time and money. A clear written brief, on the other hand, can maximise the chances of getting it *'right first time, on time, on budget'*.

I know that *'time pressures'* are the main reason most of you reading this will give for producing an inadequate project brief (or no brief at all). But in fact not writing a brief to save time is a false economy, as more often it leads to re-work, or even a failed project.

You should not be using the agency to help you clarify your strategy and requirements. That is not their job and not something they are skilled at. You should have this preparation work completed before you make an approach to them.

Clearly the scale of the project will dictate the depth and complexity of your brief. But before skipping over any of the suggested questions in this document, ask yourself this: are you skipping parts just because you don't feel like answering? And is not answering worth the risk of blowing your budget?

You do not need computer or software skills to write the brief yourself. Marketing skills are useful but not essential. Knowledge of your company, its offerings and its target customers is all that really matters.

3. A GOOD LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIP

One of the criticisms that marketers and software developers face is that they lack accountability for the very significant sums of money they spend.

To be fair, they operate in areas that have significant uncertainty and often trial and error is a necessary part of the process. However, you need to act professionally by reigning them in early. The project brief is an essential start.

Of course, you want results. But payment based on results is impossible without fully defining your business objectives, your project objectives, and outlining how you plan to measure success. And let's face it, without the ability to measure/demonstrate effectiveness, you will feel you are paying too much for what you get and the agency will feel they earned too little for their efforts.

Putting an agency through the process of developing a solution repeatedly, without concrete direction, wears on the relationship and is costly in wasted staff time (on both sides).

WHAT MAKES A GOOD BRIEF?

There is a consensus on what makes a good brief among larger companies and the agencies they hire. It contains 3 elements:

1. A written then verbal brief.
2. Clarity of thought.
3. Clearly defined objectives.

1. A WRITTEN BRIEF

Anecdotal evidence shows that the combination of a written and verbal briefing is the ideal. There are enormous benefits to starting with a written document (produced by you, the client), which is then analysed by the agency and inconsistencies discussed by both parties at the subsequent verbal briefing. The process of developing, discussing and agreeing the brief in this manner in itself adds value.

If you encounter an agency that says “*we don’t need all that stuff*” or gives the impression that they haven’t studied your brief, then my best advice is to run in the other direction.

The industry has its fair share of so called ‘*experts*’ who think they know your business and your customers better than you do. They will ignore everything you tell them. Therein lies the source of the second major reason for failed web development projects (the first being your failure to prepare an adequate brief).

A written brief is also vital to ensure the ‘*buy-in*’ of other key people in your company, in enterprise support agencies, on your board and amongst investors, suppliers and other business partners. This buy-in is essential to avoid the waste of time and resources that can happen when others challenge the key assumptions during or after the project build, leading to belated changes in direction. Ideally, your written brief should have the buy-in of all interested parties before it is delivered to potential agency partners.

2. CLARITY OF THOUGHT

A good brief is not the longest or most detailed document. It’s the one whose clarity and focus allows the agency to understand your customers, and what an effective solution for them will entail.

“I didn’t have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead.”

— Mark Twain

Briefs are called ‘briefs’ because they are meant to be brief! They are a summation of your current thinking. Too much information can confuse the process. Relevance and context are more important than reams of data. However, you should attach all relevant supporting information as appendices.

Your brief should contain key nuggets of information and it should set out the objectives of your product or service, which the website development project is to play a key role in achieving.

This clarity and objectivity is not an attempt to reduce your creativity, or indeed that of the agency. Emotive and dramatised descriptions of your company and the key issues it faces make it memorable and can spark off great creative thinking and solutions you had not considered. And it can challenge, inspire and excite those creative types in the agency you hire.

3. CLEARLY DEFINED OBJECTIVES

Ultimately the purpose of your brief is to get your chosen agency to provide you with a solution. But what problems should this solution solve? That is the basis of a project brief. Everything else is detail.

Start by making sure that your objectives are crystal clear. Use concrete business objectives like *'to double online revenue'* rather than woolly suggestions such as *'to improve brand image'*. Remember that SMART acronym? Objectives should be Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely... and remember, every objective starts with the word *'to'*...

That's not where it ends. You need to spell out exactly how you plan to measure those SMART objectives. No contract that expects to pay based on results can be made to work without appropriate measures of performance. So, clearly defining the objectives (*'success criteria'*), what that success will look like and how will it be measured is the number one requirement for writing a good brief.

LET'S FACE FACTS

Many agencies complain that the briefs they receive from clients are often inadequate and missing key information. In particular, the criteria for success and the metrics or measurements of that success are often completely ignored. It's also rare to find one that provides all the necessary market data, the full scope of the business objectives, and discusses the various media channels that might be used to drive people to the site.

Rectifying this, or worse forcing the agency to tease out and write the complete brief themselves, requires considerable work by the agency. If they're not getting paid to undertake this work, then why should they spend much time on it?

If proper time and attention has not been given to a brief before the project starts then the chances of success probably equate to the chances of winning the lottery. There are huge quantities of anecdotal evidence that show the best way to brief an agency is a combination of documentation and verbal discussion, with the documentation provided first and time given to allow the agency to review and ask questions.

If a development company or agency you approach suggests skipping the brief because they know what you want, alarm bells should be ringing. You might be a small company but this is procurement and involves a significant sum of your own and perhaps other people's money. Taking shortcuts will place you in a very unenviable position later.

When you do prepare your brief, you may find that some agencies have a tendency to ignore your brief and write their own, thus apparently duplicating effort and perhaps even misinterpreting your requirements. In truth they are not ignoring your brief nor intentionally misinterpreting your requirements (in most cases at least).

The truth is that they need to consider the project from their perspective, which will be technology and delivery focused. If they don't do this step then they are operating on a wing and prayer and again, this is not what you want to see. They don't have to be a big company to act professionally so insist on it with whomever your chosen partner is. People who act professionally care about doing a good job, care about pleasing customers and care about their reputations – others think there are many fish in the sea so it doesn't matter. Which do you want to risk your money and the future of your business on?

If it looks like the agency's brief is misinterpreting something, or it missed something key in your brief, point it out. More often than not it was a misunderstanding or an oversight. Getting these things cleared up before a project starts is vital, so be prepared to spend more time on these initial stages of the project than you originally planned – this is where the success of your project lies.

FINAL WORDS

Don't forget... you need to consider the 'words' (known as copy) that will appear on your website. Ideally this should be ready, or at least drafted, before you start building anything. If you are writing it yourself or hiring another party to prepare it then get that moving, or better yet completed, before starting work on the technology. To allow this to happen you can look at other websites and prepare similarly sized 'chunks' of text that the website developers can simply paste in.

Keep in mind that people don't read long-winded websites nowadays; they consume information in small chunks. So copy the approach of proven winners and don't try reinventing the wheel.

Something I personally do is look through website templates on *themeforest.net* and decide on the one or two I like best. Then I prepare the words/copy and supply sample images to suit my chosen templates.

I then go out looking for agencies that are prepared to use the *themeforest.net* template because I know that will save us considerable time (don't believe anyone who tells you otherwise). That equates to saved money, which allows me to do more. Usually I will insist on getting the template up and live with my copy and the images we chose together as my first milestone. At that point I know I have a website that is, presumably, bug-free and looks like it cost a fortune to design and build. Other things I want to achieve with the website come later as subsequent delivery and payment milestones. This ensures that I have something live and useful every step of the way, and that I can test before we move on.

CONCLUSION

We have now discussed the key sections in a best practice project brief and why you should write one. The key sections should be completed for every brief you write. The detail within each section will vary according to your circumstances and your project requirements.

Generally your brief should focus on defining '**where we are now**' and '**where we want to be**'. It is then the job of the agency to bridge the gap between the two. How they go about that is their specialism, or it should be, and it should happen within the context of your '**what we are doing to get there**' description.

A crucial point is to be as explicit as possible about the measures of success, i.e. "**how we will know we've arrived**". And then there are the final operational details about project management and practicalities. So enough talk, let's get started...